Respecting the Voices of Parents:

How the Spirit of Excellence Parent Empowerment Project Connects with African American Parents

Evelyn K. Moore and Oscar A. Barbarin

Introduction

Over the course of 10 years, the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has reached at-risk parents in urban and rural areas across the country through a curriculum that respects and affirms the voices of African American parents. This program is called the Parent Empowerment Project (PEP) curriculum. As a result of widespread implementation of PEP, we have learned important lessons about enhancing the role that low-income African American families play in their children's early learning.

In this paper, we hope to broaden the conversation on providing meaningful support to low-income African American parents as well as contribute findings from PEP to the growing body of knowledge on parent involvement in early learning. Our reflections are arranged in five parts. The first section provides an overview of the PEP curriculum describing the lessons NBCDI has learned about developing and providing a curriculum that responds to the wants and needs of low-income African American parents. The second section describes the need for high-quality parent education programs. The third section reviews the literature on early learning and parent education with a focus on school readiness for African American children. The fourth section provides insights from parents regarding attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors concerning parental involvement in early learning. In the final section, we consider the implications of our practical experience and research.

PEP Overview

In 1990, education reform became a national priority as then-President Bush and America's governors announced six national education goals. The first goal inspired a national movement with its call for all children in America to start school ready to learn. NBCDI responded to the urgent need for school readiness support by launching PEP in 1992 as a community-based demonstration project. PEP is an outgrowth of NBCDI's long-standing activism in the fields of child advocacy, parent training, and early education. The national policy shift to improve education created a welcome opportunity for NBCDI to continue to address the needs of African American parents. At the time of

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rollout, we had already amassed 20 years of experience with developing and distributing parent education and child development models that our affiliate network used in communities nationwide.

We formed PEP from our core value that *effective training begins with respecting the voices of parents*. In their own words, parents had something to say about their vision for their children and themselves. But who was listening? According to our early research, low-income African American parents complained that traditional capacity-building programs attempted to transplant aspirations and ideals into their lives as if to fill a void. However, most parents want to obtain or maintain a high standard of living regardless of race or income. Poor mothers and fathers are no different from affluent parents in having ambitions for their children and themselves (Hyson & DeCSipkes, 1993). Therefore, the tendency of traditional programs to ignore intrinsic family and personal goals can stand in the way of connecting with parents. Not surprisingly, we found that deficit-oriented models offended and alienated target audiences and overlooked opportunities to build on existing strengths.

In keeping with our core belief in the value of genuine parent involvement, we collaborated with a group of low-income African American parents living in Washington, DC, to research the resources and educational approaches that they would find most effective in strengthening their self-confidence and child-rearing practices. Consistent with our target demographic, the parents had young children ranging in age from birth to 3. The community-based demonstration projects produced important findings that formed the basis of the PEP curriculum.

The curriculum is composed of three units that can stand alone or be used in the sequence considered most appropriate by a parent or family facilitator. Covering fundamental self-development and child-rearing topics from an African American perspective, the units are *African American Culture*, *Successful Parenting*, and *My Vision for the Future*. Family facilitators trained by NBCDI implement the curriculum. Each unit employs a variety of educational strategies designed to engage the interest of parents and make them active participants in the teaching/learning process. These strategies include audio and visual aids, games, numerous interactive and participatory activities, formal and informal presentations by professionals, and role models from within the parents' own communities.

Throughout the educational process, parents play an important role in determining the information, resources, and experiences that will be most helpful to them. The curriculum is designed to allow parents and family facilitators to structure the choice and sequence of units, topics, and activities. The result is an experience that is active rather than passive and flexible as opposed to linear.

The Need

Raising children is not an exact science. There is no precise formula for helping children to develop their full potential. As a result, parents get on-the-job training through which they experience the successes and foibles that

accompany the learning process. They experiment with parenting methods that fit their values. Some replicate the parenting styles of their parents. Others modify the parent-child relationship they had growing up. Others depart completely from their parents' behavior. Through trial and error, many parents discover ways to give their children the support that they need to grow. However, many parents need assistance with developing effective parenting skills. Parent education aims to address this need. Ideally, parent education programs serve the purpose of taking some of the guesswork out of parenting while demonstrating to parents that they have what it takes to be successful.

High-quality parent education programs should provide access to information on best parenting practices and make the information meaningful through project-based learning. Head Start, HIPPY, and Even Start, for example, uphold those quality standards. But while the early childhood profession is teeming with research on best parenting practices, the literature seldom reaches low-income populations, including poor African Americans. Therefore, effective parent education programs can decode the literature and teach low-income mothers and fathers best practices for nurturing the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of their young children. In the following sections, we explore the need and describe what has been learned about the benefits and limits of parent education. In addition, we share our experience with PEP and use that experience to form recommendations for connecting with low-income African American parents.

Parental Involvement and School Readiness

Multiple factors shape parent involvement in early learning. As with any behavior, the way in which parents interact with their young children develops in a multidimensional realm as opposed to in a vacuum. Cultural norms, educational attainment, income, and the demands of work life are among the leading factors that influence parenting styles and patterns of involvement with their children. The 1997 *National Study of the Changing Workforce* presents groundbreaking research on how work, family, and personal life interrelate and affect parenting (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1997). The study reports that most members of America's workforce live in households with family and have responsibilities associated with raising children. Against this backdrop of family responsibilities, the amount of time devoted to work outside of the home is increasing. As a result, a growing number of working parents struggle to manage the competing priorities of work and family. They race through weekdays and weekends at the command of demanding schedules. Pushing multitasking to the limits, they try to align their parenting duties—including arranging child care, participating in school life, assisting with homework, and organizing enrichment activities—with their numerous career obligations. Concurrent imperatives to earn a living and raise children present an enormous challenge that requires commitment, stamina, resources, time-management skills, and a support network. Tragic events such as those of September 11, 2002, coupled with a fluctuating national economy, heighten anxiety and deepen concerns parents have over the safety, quality of care, and effectiveness of education for their children. This tumultuous beginning

to the 21st century has given rise to a beleaguered generation of parents who are increasingly turning to self-help books, peer groups, school systems, faith-based organizations, public policy makers, and advocacy organizations for relief.

For at-risk parents, the rigors of everyday life produce additional challenges. Hardships such as unemployment, low educational attainment, and lack of access to high-quality health care, child care, and housing can threaten their ability to manage parenting responsibilities (Lerman, 2002). Current U.S. Census data show that African American parents are disproportionately at risk. Poverty rates, for example, indicate a gap in well-being along racial lines. Distressingly, the poverty rate for African Americans is nearly quadruple the poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites (23% and 6%, respectively). Likewise, African Americans have attained less education than their White counterparts. Only 77% of African Americans 25 years and older have a high school diploma or more compared with 88% for non-Hispanic Whites. In addition, the unemployment rate for African Americans is more than twice that for non-Hispanic Whites, 9% and 4%, respectively.

Within this disparate socioeconomic context, 4.8 million African American families are raising 11.8 million children, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The impact of poverty and related factors reverberates in home, school, and community life. Volumes of research since the 1960s underscore the fact that experiences that take place at home before a child enters school significantly affect his or her school readiness (Slaughter-Defoe, 2000). Noted consequences of poverty on school readiness include an increase in emotional, physical, and behavioral problems for poor children as compared to children who are not poor (Emig, 2000). As a result, low-income children are more likely than their counterparts to arrive at school hungry, tired, physically ill, or troubled. In the 1993 *Kindergarten Teacher Survey on Student Readiness*, kindergarten teachers posit that being physically healthy, rested, and well nourished are the most important parts of school readiness (West, 1993).

Language and cognitive development also suffer under poverty. Studies find that low-income parents are less likely than higher-income parents to perform activities that support early literacy and cognition, such as reading to their preschoolers frequently, modeling reading at home, and engaging their young children in conversation (Marcon, 1999). The literature presents copious evidence that poor children disproportionately start school without having developed emergent literacy skills. Based on kindergarten assessments, poor children are less likely to recognize letters, assign sounds to letter combinations, represent ideas through writing or drawing, and understand the sequence of stories. In addition to being associated with the child's basic understanding of letters, words, and their combinations, literacy development is also related to the number and complexity of words the child has available for speech and discourse (Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000). This relationship means that vocabulary and oral language skills are especially important in promoting reading development. Parents who promote these skills help their children to (1) grasp a

deeper understanding of the meaning and function of words, ideas, stories, and the world around them (Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994; Rush, 1999); (2) recognize the link between spoken words and print (Rush, 1999); and (3) become familiar with sophisticated vocabulary (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Dickinson & Tabors, 1991). Building the vocabulary and discourse skills that are crucial to literacy development happens when parents routinely read books to their young children, discuss opinions, explain events, and share experiences (Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994).

In conjunction with the need for parents to actively promote language development, the literature suggests that a child's home environment is also an important aspect of early literacy. A literacy-rich environment is characterized by the ready availability of print materials, writing utensils, and space to read and write. Literacy-rich environments also feature adults who promote literacy development in a number of ways, including reading and writing as part of their daily routine, encouraging children to ask and answer questions during reading and writing activities, and guiding and monitoring television viewing for content and frequency (Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Senechal & LeFevre, 2001). Children with early exposure to literacy experiences are especially likely to have positive early reading outcomes (Marvin & Mirenda, 1993; Senechal & LeFevre, 2001). As mentioned above, economically disadvantaged children are least likely to have exposure and access to literacy materials and experiences at home that promote language development and reading acquisition (Neuman, 1999).

Although only a modest amount of research has been done on the ways in which home environments and parental behavior relate to early numeracy skills, the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education published a report (Fromboluti, Magarity, & Rinck, 1999) outlining activities that parents can engage in to encourage the learning and development of the "whole child," including children's early learning in mathematics. The suggestions highlight important concepts in early math learning and recommend everyday activities that parents can carry out in order to promote their children's understanding of those concepts. The reports proposes, for example, that parents read rhyming books to their children, use words such as "near," "approximately," and "in between," when estimating time or distance, create graphs and charts that contain information about the child or events, play with puzzles, ask their children to look for numbers in their environment, and allow their children to measure and divide objects. Essentially, those activities can build mathematics skills such as problem solving, reasoning, number sense, numeration, geometry, spatial skills, estimation, fractions, statistics, and probability. Moreover, the proposals can be incorporated easily into everyday routines (see also Anderson, 1997).

In summary, parent involvement in the lives of young children produces remarkably positive outcomes related to school readiness. This axiom holds true across cultural, racial, and population lines (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Most certainly, when parents take part in their children's early learning, children do better in school

(Little, 1998). For a number of reasons, parent education and parent involvement add extraordinary value to the learning process. Among the benefits, *parental involvement* allows children to maintain continuity between the learning that takes place at home and school. In addition, learning gains appear to be longer lasting when parental involvement begins at an early age (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992). However, for low-income African American parents, a myriad of factors interfere with the relationship between parent involvement and school readiness. The challenge for parents, educators, and advocates is to develop and implement strategies for addressing and ameliorating the negative impact that poverty, low educational attainment, and other hardships pose on parent involvement.

In Their Own Voices

As part of our research on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors concerning parental involvement in early learning, NBCDI conducted six focus groups in the fall of 2002 in Richmond, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; and Oakland, California. The groups in Richmond consisted of African American mothers with children under 6 years old and African American fathers of children under 6 living in low-income households. The mothers were single, between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, living in low-income households up to 200% of the federal poverty guideline. The groups in Chicago consisted of low-income, African American mothers with children under 6 and grandparents with grandchildren under 6 years old living in low-income households. The mothers were between the ages of 25 and 35 years old, married or unmarried with partners. The groups in Oakland consisted of low-income, young African American mothers who were married or unmarried with partners and older low-income single African American mothers. We recognize that the following findings must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, but, nevertheless, these findings provide invaluable insight into what parents view as their role in early learning.

Our findings reveal a wide divergence between what the literature recommends for parental involvement and what our focus group participants view as their role in promoting early learning. In contrast to conventional theory that parents are their children's primary teachers, the parents we convened view schools as primarily responsible for educating their children. They cast themselves in a supporting role in the education process. When probed about the hierarchy they espoused, parents expressed doubt in their ability to nurture their children's early learning. However, the groups believed that low-income parents, including themselves, could increase their involvement in their young children's education both at home and in school.

As an extension of their belief about the primacy of schools, most participants opined that the nation's schools are not doing a good job of educating African American children and providing safe havens for learning. Participants related school safety to high-quality education, voicing a belief that violence is prevalent in their children's schools. However, the groups

suggested that turbulent home and community environments contribute to poor educational outcomes and that parents should take more responsibility for improving their children's readiness for school.

Another salient finding is that participants did not see a relationship between poverty and poor school readiness until the facilitator substantiated the relationship with data. However, the focus groups emphasized that poverty does not necessarily predict school readiness.

Regarding language development, parents' beliefs were consistent with research regarding the value of some practices but not others. For example, few parents recognized the value of encouraging curiosity about the world and using exploratory questioning. However, they did recognize the importance of conversations, actively listening to children, and creating predictable environments in the home. Nevertheless, the facilitators observed a dichotomy between values and behavior between acknowledging the importance of practices that contribute to early literacy and the actual use of those practices. Moreover, parents in the focus groups viewed reading as a life skill necessary for survival. A majority acknowledged that reading for pleasure or to expand knowledge, or to model reading for their young children, was not part of their day-to-day routine.

Despite the focus groups' alternative viewpoints and behaviors regarding parent involvement in early learning, the participants' attitudes about the value of education were consistent with mainstream ideology. Like most parents, they want their children to receive a high-quality education across the continuum, from kindergarten to college or other higher learning experiences. They associate educational attainment with employability, reasoning that higher education will prepare their children to gain rewarding careers. Education is seen as a mechanism for breaking their families' cycle of poverty. They aspire to place their children on a positive trajectory that leads to economic stability and overall well-being.

Our preliminary focus groups revealed implications for programs serving low-income African American parents. We plan to expand our research to include a wider sampling of low-income African American parents and, accordingly, report on our findings.

Implications of the Success of PEP for Other Parent-Focused Programs

Today, many different programs have been developed for connecting with parents and involving them in their children's education. A cursory review of the evaluations of some of these programs suggests that they are very good at working with a self-selected and narrow range of families. Unfortunately, few have been very successful in enlisting and retaining families where the risks of poor outcomes for children appear greatest. The experience and success of the PEP program in successfully engaging such families hold out

lessons for all who seek to work with parents. These experiences demonstrate clearly that success in working with difficult-to-reach families will be dependent on whether the program possesses several very specific features. They begin with a focus on men and women, persons with individual histories and needs who are important in their own right not just because they are parents. The program, irrespective of the content, must reflect the goals and needs of its participants at least as it must reflect the goals of the program developer or parent educator. It must therefore be flexible enough and provide room to individualize goals. Most importantly, it must affirm parental competence and knowledge and reflect a sensitive understanding of participants' culture and history.

Accordingly, we have synthesized lessons from our experience into recommendations for developing and implementing successful parenting programs. The recommendations are a guideline for respecting the voices of African American parents. Simultaneously, they have broader applicability. The recommendations that follow underscore qualities to be included in any program of outreach and collaboration with all families—rich or poor, Black or White, English speaking or not:

- Build programs on a foundation of respect for the opinions and experiences of parents. **Respect is the cornerstone of PEP. Our curriculum is based on our belief that *all* parents aspire to be successful parents and are capable of transforming their aspirations into reality. Anchored by this principle, PEP identifies and builds on the strengths of parents. We let them know that their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors matter to us and to their development.**
- **Affirm the value of parents.** From Maslow's seminal research on humanistic psychology to anecdotal findings, a body of evidence confirms that self-esteem is a basic human need. As part of human nature, people want to achieve, be competent, and gain approval and recognition. PEP, therefore, is committed to affirming the value of parents.
- **Ask questions and listen to the answers.** Communicating effectively is an interactive process that involves asking questions and listening to the answers. PEP establishes an open line of communication with parents in order to encourage candid dialogue, impart information, and gather information that will strengthen our connection with parents. We explore attitudes and beliefs and encourage parents to seek information from us, too. In promoting linear conversation, PEP validates that learning is an ongoing and reciprocal process. Parents realize that they help us expand our knowledge of their needs while we broaden their understanding of successful parenting.
- **Integrate cultural traditions into the program.** The African American Culture unit provides the cultural context for working with parents. Its purpose is to inform and to reinforce in parents a sense of pride in themselves, their community, and their history. Within the context of exploring cultural art forms and historical influences, parents gain inspiration and self-esteem and are given a framework for using literature, art,

music, entertainment, and community life to enhance the development of their children.

Conclusion

Since 1970, NBCDI has worked to promote a high-quality life for African American children and their families. Serving African American children and families has been our sole mission for more than 30 years. Our experiences prior and subsequent to the inception of PEP in 1992 have taught us important lessons about connecting with African American parents. African American parents who are poor want what is best for their children. Poverty, despite its deleterious effects on life quality, has not weakened the fundamental aspiration of parents to provide their children with a safe, loving, and nurturing home life nor diminished their optimism about the prospects of their children's success at school. They understand that most, if not all, parents yearn to foster their children's full potential. Successful programs also know that if they take hold of and internalize the aspirations of parents, they have a powerful means of motivating parents toward positive action. Most of all, effective parenting programs acknowledge, respect, and build on these aspirations and give parents additional tools to make those dreams reality.

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